

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 134

CS 014 080

AUTHOR Comber, Barbara
TITLE The Construction of Literate Cultures in Disadvantaged Schools: Teachers' Work, Children's Work.
PUB DATE 1993-07-05
NOTE 38p.; Paper presented at the International Australian Reading Association Conference (Melbourne, Australia, July 5-9, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Classroom Techniques; *Disadvantaged Schools; *Discourse Communities; Educational Research; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *Literacy; Naturalistic Observation; *School Culture; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS Australia; *Teaching Perspectives

ABSTRACT

Recent debates focus on literacy curriculum as if it is separate from teachers' other work, almost at times as if teachers and their contexts are irrelevant to what is the most appropriate literacy pedagogy. Perhaps learning to read and write is not hard work, but teaching is, no matter which theoretical orientation about literacy is adhered to. The multiplicities of other functions that teachers enact leave them positioned in contradictory ways against their imagined ideal literacy classroom. These contradictions sent one researcher into disadvantaged schools to talk with and observe teachers at work. This paper is a first exploration of these investigations in one school. The paper considers, through the stories and classroom discourse of teachers and their students, the question: What kinds of literate cultures do teachers construct in a disadvantaged school? It offers texts from everyday school and classroom life to reconsider what teachers do as they develop a literate culture. It describes the kinds of literate work that children do and discusses the dominant discourses that surround the construction of literate cultures at school. The paper provides examples of the ways in which these teachers make spaces for other kinds of literate cultures and the ways in which classrooms are sites for multiple and at times contradictory literacies which compete for time and priority. (Contains 19 references.) (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

The Construction of Literate Cultures in Disadvantaged Schools :
Teachers' Work, Children's Work.

Barbara Comber

Keynote Address presented at the 1st International Australian Reading
Association Conference

"LITERACY FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM "

Melbourne

July 5 -9 1993

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☐ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to
improve reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this
document do not necessarily represent
official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

B. Comber

**The Construction of Literate Cultures in Disadvantaged Schools :
Teachers' Work, Children's Work.**

I used to believe that successful literacy teaching incorporated similar practices in different contexts (Comber, 1987). I was influenced by Edelsky et al. (1983) who analysed the successful practices of teachers who negotiated engaging and challenging literacy curricula. Recently however I have become more aware of class, gender and race as issues for teachers in the literacy curricula that are played out. Jones (1989), Freebody (1990), Freebody and Welch (1993) show the ways in which class has an impact on the kinds of curriculum to which students get access, and they also indicate how class related knowledge is implicitly tested by schools.

Haberman (1991) goes so far as to suggest that a pedagogy of poverty exists. Writers such as Walton (1992), Dunn (1991), and Delpit (1988, 1992) question the kinds of pedagogies that are effective with different groups of minority students. They suggest that whole language approaches are not explicit enough to induct students, who are disadvantaged by race, gender, colour or socioeconomic circumstances, into the kinds of literacies that count in white, middle class society. Statewide surveys indicate that students who are disadvantaged perform less well on literacy tasks than their more affluent peers. Other surveys have shown that teachers do not always find mainstream language arts inservice useful in disadvantaged schools (Badger et al, 1992).

Were Smith (1973) and Harste et al. (1984) and others wrong when they suggested that reading and writing could be easy and even enjoyable for

students and that it was teachers who make it difficult? Is the "literacy was meant to be easy" philosophy a myth unconsciously perpetuated in the interests of students who were going to join the literate culture anyway? Did learning to read and write have to be hard work for other children after all? While theorists and researchers argue that children can enjoy learning to read and write in real and meaningful contexts and that literacy learning does not need to be difficult there is no parallel movement to convince teachers that teaching is easy. Teaching was never meant to be easy! As I began listen to teachers I began to hear stuff that I hadn't wanted to hear and that many of them hadn't wanted to tell. Not all students were accepting teachers' best offers to participate in the literate culture. As Stuckey (1991) points out it may not be as simple as inviting the illiterate to dinner (p. 35). I became very conscious of the criticisms that one kind of pedagogy was not working for all kids (not that I was convinced that we had one kind of pedagogy).

Recent debates focus on literacy curriculum as if it is separate from teachers' other work, almost at times as if teachers and their contexts are irrelevant to what is the most appropriate literacy pedagogy. These debates often exclude teachers or ignore teachers' complaints about proposed pedagogies. Perhaps learning to read and write isn't hard work, but teaching is, no matter which theoretical orientation about literacy one adheres to. In defining appropriate school literacies and effective pedagogies to deliver these literacies educators often ignore the multiplicities of other functions that teachers enact and which leave teachers positioned in contradictory ways against their imagined ideal literacy classroom.

These questions and contradictions sent me into disadvantaged schools to talk with and observe teachers at work. This paper is a first exploration of these investigations in one school. I consider, through the stories and classroom discourse of teachers and their students, the question : What kinds of literate cultures do teachers construct in a disadvantaged school? There are no goodies and baddies in these stories, rather teachers trying to teach students what they understand about literate cultures and their requirements. I offer texts from everyday school and classroom life to reconsider what teachers do as they develop a literate culture.

This study is no way comparative. I portray teachers and children working, playing and learning together in classrooms in a disadvantaged school, as a phenomenon in its own right. I do not argue that life is different in middle or upper class schools nor that these descriptions are typical of literacy pedagogy in other disadvantaged schools. However other studies suggest that these portrayals of literacy pedagogy and teachers' work in disadvantaged schools are not unique. Readers will make their own comparisons and draw their own contrasts from their own educational sites. I present this analysis to raise questions rather than to prove certainties. I thank the teachers and students for having me in their classrooms and allowing me to include transcripts taken from interviews and classroom lessons. Initially I consider the work that teachers do as they teach students about school reading and writing by including transcripts from language arts time in two different classroom. I examine the teachers' classroom discourse to consider what kinds of literate cultures are being constructed and what the ideal literate student might be in these classrooms. I describe the kinds of literate work that children do. I discuss the dominant discourses that surround the construction of literate cultures at school. Finally I provide examples of the ways in which these teachers

make spaces for other kinds of literate cultures and the ways in which classrooms are sites for multiple and at times contradictory literacies which compete for time and priority.

Ella : Let's do some real work now.

Ella had been teaching at the same disadvantaged school for about ten years since graduating from Teachers' College. Approximately eighty percent of the students are receiving government assistance and classified as school card holders. The children come from the local area which is inner suburban and semi residential and industrial. Other children come from some distance by bus or car.

The children at Ella's school are members of Aboriginal, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Polish, Czechoslovakian, Italian as well as from other cultural and linguistic communities. Many of the parents and caregivers are unemployed. Although it is a Catholic school less than half the community identify themselves as Catholic.

Ella knows and has taught almost all of the children. The physical environment of her classroom represents the whole language maxim "Immerse children in print ". Adult visitors and Ella herself have to stoop to half their height to avoid collisions with the students' and teacher's artefacts which hang from netting attached to the ceiling. Student texts and artwork are everywhere. In fact we realised at one point that some children could not see the print she was referring to on the blackboard because of other material being in the their way. Ella makes magnificent books to share which she illustrates herself or asks the children to illustrate. She has participated in genre workshops and is enthusiastic about teaching children to read and write factual texts. Her usual morning

routine includes children completing their Reading Journals, sharing big books and singing. However she was not locked into this and she also includes whole class look-cover-write-check activities, garden journals and demonstrates factual genres. Around the room are posters Ella has brainstormed with the children. 'Good listeners.... good readers.... good writers.....' She devotes considerable time to making her expectations explicit.

At the end of one lesson spent sharing songs and caring for the garden Ella announces *OK Sunshine Room. Time to line up now. Let's do some real work now.* She then turned to me saying, *What's real work anyway?* Ella's question is critical to understanding the ways in which teachers construct literate cultures at school. In disadvantaged school teachers' work and children's work has to be negotiated within the contexts of other demands. What does count as real work and what is the connection between real work and teaching children to participate in a literate culture? How do teachers make space for academic instruction and for students' learning? How do other roles intrude into their academic space and time and what do they try to do about these intrusions? What do they see as intrusions and what they see as their real work?

In the passage that follows I provide a shortened transcript of a segment of a language arts period in Ella's classroom to indicate what her work looks like and to examine the contexts in which she sets up literacy instruction. Literacy pedagogy is not separate from teachers' other roles. It is not just a matter of selecting whole language or genre or traditional approaches and off you go - no problems. Teachers orient literacy instruction in relation to how they see their other functions. Literacy

discourses and pedagogies compete simultaneously with others discourses, such as behaviour management, work and nurturing.

Field notes : 5/11/92

Ella teaches a composite prep-one-two class. A new student who had arrived from Vietnam just two weeks earlier starts school. She is very distressed. She speaks no English. M cries and coughs and Ella picks her up.

Ella Who was away yesterday?

S and T come in late. P shows his watch to Ella.

Ella Who's got something to show/tell the whole class this morning? I think D has, come here D.

D goes to fetch an encyclopedia he has brought from home. Meanwhile a child comes in from another class to collect book club forms.

Ella Any book clubs? *A few children get forms and money.*

OK. Tomorrow's the last day Sunshine Room. In a big, big voice people cannot hear you.

A parent walks in with T. T looks uncertain. D gets ready to start talking. L brings in a note.

Ella [to BC.] It's going to be one of those days today. It's one interruption after another. *D shows a few pages from his book without any commentary.* What shall we do this morning? Reading journals? D's been showing his excellent book. Do you want me to read it later? Everyone eyes on X. Look at her beautiful dress.

Child It's my party dress. I got it today.

Ella It's your birthday today isn't it. Everyone it's X's birthday.

They sing Happy Birthday to X

Ella So how many claps do you want us to give you today? Six. What else did you get for your birthday. *X explains what she got for her birthday.*

Ella Ah K listen in please. Who's that coughing like that? Is that you A? You're sick.

Many children start to cough. Ella reads the print at the bottom of the Bobcat poster as she notices that a child is trying to read it.

Ella Yes M. I'm not listening to you J, not if you call out like that. OK Reading Journals.

M starts to cry and coughs.

Ella It's a bit scary for her. Let's see how quietly we can get started this morning and do our work.

Z from year 6 comes in and says Mrs A. sent her in because the others are going on an excursion and she wasn't allowed to go. Ella hands out the Reading Journals, cuddles M and does R's lunch order. S shows Ella some new clothing.

Ella Oh they're groovy aren't they? Ella *finds the pages in the Reading Journals for some of the children.* Look at that class - a bit off today. [to BC but loud enough for children to hear]

They are talking loudly as they find their home readers and begin their journals. M starts to cry again.

Ella All right Sunshine Room you should be on task.

M cries and cries and coughs and comes back to sit on Ella's lap. K tells Ella he cannot find his Reading Journal. Still with M in tow she begins to look through the container where they are stored.

Ella Right K if you used it yesterday...Come on C. Right, good to see everyone is settled down now. The people on this table have almost finished - very good; excellent. I think these can be the best workers this morning. Or is it this

table or this? Maybe everyone. *The children become quiet and start to look at their papers and draw or write. They look up at Ella to check if she is watching them. Perfect beautiful.*

The children are doing their Reading Journals. They copy the title and draw a picture.

Ella OK Sunshine Room, 5 more minutes and then we're going to have some big books together.

M cries very loudly again. The children at the table where I'm sitting chat about TV programs and draw their pictures. Then they talk about the ghost train at the show. As the children finish they go to sit on the mat. Ella is over that side of the room already with M and listening to individual children read. Z from grade 6 wanders around and chats with the children.

Ella OK two more minutes Sunshine Room.

Ella checks their Reading Journals and reads them aloud and hears a few children read.

Ella [to BC] At least they've settled down a bit now. See what it's like. How are we going over here? You've got one minute to go. *Ella goes with M to check out what the others are doing.*

Ella Pack up now please. OK let's pack up now. Oh reading books are we? *[to a small group who are reading big books together on the floor]* We'll have some together. *M starts to cry very loudly again. Several children start to fight as they put back their books.*

Ella OK. Hands on heads, shoulders, in the air, on bottoms.

Sings song 'With my hands on my head'.

Ella does the actions with M on her lap. J starts to cry and cough too.

Ella What's wrong J? Change your home book.

They do another poem.

Ella I was going to say Stop that C and turn this way S. See what happens. I cannot concentrate on two things at once.

They go back to their rhyme. It's a clapping checking rhyme. W comes in to get the staple gun. M starts to cry very loudly and Ella stops what she's doing and talks about how she might be feeling.

Ella I think she's sick and yesterday I didn't think she was too bad but..

Child I saw her crying when I was coming home with my mum.

Child I thought she'd hurt herself.

Ella No I think she's really sick. You know when you didn't feel well and you felt really sad and you said, "I don't know what's wrong with me."

Ella gets and begins to read a big book 'Bubble gum'.

Ella Why do we say it louder V? Remember.

Child Cos it's got a question.

Ella Is that a question mark?

Child An exclamation mark.

Ella points and reads aloud. Kids join in.

Ella No bubble gum at school - cos it's trouble gum. *As she finishes the story children begin to talk. B I can only hear one person at a time. Ella doesn't ask for any comments but starts to read 'Dear Zoo'. M starts to cry again. One of the kids complains about the noise.*

Ella Don't listen to anyone who calls out. *[to her child helper who is sitting on the special chair]* Choose someone with lovely manners, who's sitting on their bottom. On your bottom . . . and she might choose you. Ah, don't call out.

M starts to cry again very loudly. J starts to cry.

Child J's crying.

Ella I don't think there's any reason for J to cry.

They continue to read the story.

Ella Can we read this together?

H, H, H, turn around, sit down, good girl.

Who can read this sign?

Z starts to read the zoo animals book.

Aa alligator eating apples a a a

to time of skip to my lou my darling.

Ella Cc Camel eating carrots c c c

Who thinks they can remember the next one?

Ella Next one D. Cannot remember. Doesn't matter. Q.

Child Elephant eating eggs e e e.

Ella The next one's a tricky one. O.

Ibis eating ice cream i i i.

Jaguar eating jellybeans j j j

Ella S.

Child J went like that to me.

Ella You need to decide if you can sit nicely with us or go to
Time Out.

Child Some of the animals are eating junk food and I don't think
they should be.

Ella No I agree with you 100%. Next one. Ooh. Now what's
that next one do you think. H, H. Give you a clue it's a m.
Monkey's eating muesli bars. *They continue to sing their
way through the book. M cries again.*

Ella [to BC.] I don't really know what to do with her.

BC Is there is anyone who speaks her language in the school.
so you can find out if she's homesick or sick or...

Ella Yes N - I might have to get N.

What kinds of work does Ella during the time she sets aside for literacy instruction? How can we understand the nature of her work and its implications for literacy pedagogy and the development of literate cultures at school? What kinds of work do children do? Ella manages forms and money, looks after a child from another class, cuddles a distressed child on her lap, finds books, fills in her roll book, acknowledges parents as they drop off children, distributes materials, reminds children of rules for behaviour, listens to children read, reads a big book, points out punctuation in the big book and listens to children's news amongst other kinds of tasks. She frequently does many of these things simultaneously. She nurtures, disciplines and manages as she tries to make a space and time for literacy teaching and learning. Some of the problems that face her are interruptions, not being able to speak some children's home languages and always feeling like she is not doing enough. Connell (1985) points out the complex and often contradictory nature of teachers' work and the ways in which they experience it. However we lack theories which examine the ways in which teachers' work impacts on literacy pedagogies and the development of literate cultures.

During this morning in Ella's classroom I was reminded of a young teacher in a different disadvantaged school who told me that he didn't have time for literacy because he was too busy with behaviour management. Literacy teaching is embedded in the contexts of school life. It is only a part of teachers' work and is shaped by their other work. Yet frequently we talk about literacy teaching as though its connections with other roles is unproblematic. A teacher-researcher colleague left out the initial part of a lesson she was transcribing because it was "not the literacy stuff", but the organisational and managerial. Teachers however need to work out what discourses of emancipation, empowerment and critical literacy have got to

do with behaviour management, survival and the National English Profile. Ella is frustrated with lessons such as this one. Her academic aims for the lesson are not met. She has shared a book. The children have done Reading Journals and she has heard several children read in an interrupted fashion. At the end of it she is not too sure what she or the children have achieved.

It is important to understand how other functions of schooling shape literacy and language instruction. Ella's discourse constructs classroom expectations and ways of understanding what is happening. Ella continually evaluates their joint performance against these expectations.

It's going to be one of those days today.

Let's see how quietly we can get started this morning and do our work.

...a bit off today...

All right Sunshine Room you should be on task.

Right, good to see everyone is settled down now.

The people on this table have almost finished - very good; excellent. I think these can be the best workers this morning. Or is it this table or this? Maybe everyone.

Ella describes their literacy activities in terms of work. I became interested in the comments that teachers make when children are busy with set tasks. I call this teacher voice-over because it reminds me of the commentary on the news or documentaries that tell you how you should interpret what you're seeing. When teachers speak as children work it does a similar thing. It serves as a reminder about how children should understand what is happening. It tells them once again what the criteria are in this situation, what they should look like, how they should be behaving, what to do with

their hands, when they can speak, what they should be doing and at the same time it provides them with the vocabulary to understand and describe their experience.

Ella's voice-over and her explicit instruction and feedback to children construct children as "workers". She focuses on doing work and about working quietly and about being on task. The discourse of work is not separate from learning literacy. Children are workers; they work quietly; they produce good work. Teachers and children together negotiate "real work". They say to Ella, "Look how much work I did". This is not just one lesson's discourse but it is one way that Ella and her colleagues talk with students daily about classroom life.

Last song and then we're going to do some work .

We have a lot of work to do today, lots of work, lots of work we didn't finish.

Mrs O wants to start work straight away.

He works hard this boy.

Good boy- you've worked really well today, haven't you.

Have a look at this fantastic worker [showing a child's book]. We've got some fantastic workers in this room - haven't we? It's marvellous.

K's working very well-aren't you K?

With all the things to do ...we can't afford to waste any time. Think about doing lots of work, getting organised quickly and not waste time.

Concentrate on reading, not talking. When you are talking you can't concentrate on the work. I know I can't concentrate on the work if I'm talking to someone. I can't do two things at the one time. I do

one thing OK. So concentrate when you concentrate then you do your work much better and more and more. Do people agree with that?

Ella's discourse explicitly and implicitly constructed a literate culture where being on task and high productivity were expected and valued. Her discourse about work does not grow in a vacuum and needs to be understood as a part of a whole school discourse and more broadly it needs to be read as part of the nation wide discourses about output, the functions of schooling and Australia's workforce.

As will emerge throughout this a paper teachers in this disadvantaged school shared a common discourse that linked work, literacy and appropriate school behaviour. Through the transcript which follows I explore the ways in which another teacher from the same school, Jan, uses a similar discourse within which the literacy curriculum is constructed.

Jan : Let's see if you can be on task?

Jan has a year three-four composite class which included at the beginning of the year some children who had reputations from previous classes as being very difficult to manage. Since the beginning of the year a number of these children left the class, but by Jan's reports it had not been without cost and she is now very concerned at the beginning of term three to make sure that the time she has left with the children is productive. She explains that she is very worried about the literacy of almost a third of the children in the class. As I walk into the classroom Jan warns me not to expect too much today and explains that she is having hassles. She does not elaborate. A number of messengers come in from other classes. Jan looks frustrated

and quips to one child: *Is there anyone else who would like to come in? Let's have the whole school in.*

She sets a journal writing task so that she can find out what the class did the previous day when she was away driving the school bus. She reminds them to check their rules for journal writing before they start. (Rules for journal include writing neatly, conserving paper, and doing a small illustration **after** writing.) The children get books out of their trays and chat quietly as they get organised to begin. Jan begins to walk around, occasionally saying *Shh Shh* to individuals or groups of children or asking them if they've read their journal rules yet.

H, who has been late on a number of previous days, arrives twenty five minutes late. Jan talks with her quietly, but the students and I see her screw up the note explaining lateness and overhear her scolding the latecomer, *That's not good enough...you don't know what's happening today or anything we've discussed.* As Jan talks with H other children gradually chat a little louder until they are interrupted by the following comment.

Jan : Excuse me. One of my goals that I'm going to set for the day is that people stay on task. Do you know what that means? G? E? Who doesn't know what being on task means? [No-one responds]

Jan used this comment to signal to students that their behaviour was not what she expected. She had asked them to make a journal entry and she expected them to work in silence although this had not been explicitly stated at the beginning of the task. Perhaps Jan's tolerance for noise had decreased since she set the task. Jan stops talking to the latecomer and

watches until the other students begin to write. Several students are reminded individually *B, A - on task please*. Next Jan turns back to the late student and continues for several minutes to explain the consequences of being late. When she finishes speaking the guilty child goes to her seat and grins widely at those around her while Jan begins to patrol, checking what the others have produced in her absence.

At one table she asks : *Where's today's recordings? Where's the date? What have you been doing while I was talking to H?* She glares at the students who have not yet began to write or even entered the day's date. She shows A how to write the date and then reminds her before moving on: *A on your story task please - just concentrate on the piece of paper.* Two minutes later and forty minutes after the lesson begins Jan announces: *OK Would you finish the sentence you're writing now. please and underneath would you please write this in your journal.*

On the blackboard Jan writes "My goal today is to stay on task."

Jan continues to give the next instruction as she writes. *When you've written that could you please bring your journals down to the floor and sit in a circle please.* A immediately hops up and goes to sit on the floor. Jan notices this and questions her. *You haven't written that A. Did you hear me say that?*

The children gradually come to the floor with their journals. Jan comments on one :*What a beautiful journal!* referring to how neatly it is presented. While Jan waits another staff member comes in and says: *I was wondering if during the course of the day you could name for me the*

people who are very good readers. We need some people to read a reflection.

She explains a little more to the children what's required and then she discusses it briefly with Jan before leaving.

Jan : Knee-to-knee everybody. That's not knee-to-knee mate. G, (who's still not on the floor) are you ready to join us? OK. My goal today is to stay on task. When we write up our journal tomorrow I'm going to ask you to write up each lesson whether you stayed on task. What are some of the behaviours that say you're staying on task? We might start with a person with our hand up and go around the circle. How do we act when we're on task?

J Works quietly.

C If you're talking, blabbing then you can see we're not working.

K. Very good.

Jan Very good (nodding).

G Do your best-trying to do your work well.

Student Work quietly and don't disturb anyone else.

Student Work hard.

H Getting to school early.

Student Staying on task.

Student *Working and not talking.*

Student You get a lot done.

Jan Can we look at the person who is actually speaking? 'Cause
S's talking just to me.

S Usually if they're working they get a lot done.

N [Says nothing, but gradually goes scarlet]

Jan Do you know what it means N?

N [Shakes her head.]

Jan Does it mean anything? Does it mean something to do with
your school environment?

[There is a lengthy pause-at least one minute, but still N does
not speak.]

Jan We might come back.

T Sits quietly. I has a really good one but I cannot....

Jan What does on task behaviour look/feel like?

- Student Ignoring other people.
- Student Not speaking to anyone else while you're working.
- Student Don't disturb anyone else while they're thinking.
- Student Do your own work.
- Student Not fiddling.
- T Not wandering around.
- Student Not disturbing others.
- Jan Sticking to what the task is.
- L Feel confident to spell a word.
- M Concentrate on your work.
- Jan If you are really working you should look at your work. Every few lines that you've written, go back and read it... Staying on task is basically a combination of all the things we've talked about. On task means looking at me now. Eye contact. If the task is your writing journal then talking to the person next door to you is not on task. Just think about your journal writing this morning.....

Jan continued to quiz them about what they had done that morning, whether they had been on task. She then set three tasks for three different groups. Group one was to make a list of what on task behaviour looks like. Group two was to make a list of what on task behaviour feels like and group three was to make a list of what on task behaviour sounds like. When the children returned with their lists of behaviours they were discussed, including a clarification of 10cm voices!

In this episode Jan faces similar intrusions to her literacy agenda as Ella. She makes a similar response to her teaching situation. The explicit development of a work culture within the classroom is reflected in her talk and in the tasks that the students are required to do. Not only does Jan give repeated messages about being on task while students write at their desks she makes the definition of "on task" behaviour the agenda for group work. Later the students write about being on task. The learning environment is work focussed and the teachers' work in this literacy lesson centres on management and surveillance.

Jan and Ella were not unique in their talk about work habits though some teachers were less direct. In another composite Prep-one-two class Julia constructed a work culture in slightly different terms.

You're getting organised in a very adult way.

M I like the way you're on task.

I really like the way L's table's working so quietly and they're getting so much done.

On this occasion Julia's voice-over praised students who met her expectations for work behaviour. At other times Julia had students

rehearse orally their responsibilities before they returned to their desks - more like a pep talk.

Julia OK. I'd like you to go back to your tables. Before you go what sorts of things do you need to remember about being on task?
A, what do you need to remember?

A You mustn't draw when you're not asked.

R If you make too much noise the mice might die.

P If you're being too noisy you might make people not do much, so they might not be able to concentrate.

Julia Right you've got a responsibility on your own work and a responsibility on other peoples' work. All right go back and show me you understand those expectations.

[Children return to tables.]

Julia [Julia walks around the tables as children sit down and begin.]
Oh L, you're on task straight away... P are you ready to start love? B would you like to start straight away dear? H I've got to talk to you about your voice dear. It cannot be that loud.

So in Julia's classroom the children are asked ever so nicely and ever so gently to behave in certain kinds of ways. The affectionate terms in which Julia couches her demands do not soften the demands. They are reminded of their responsibilities to their own work and that of other people. They

learn the right answers to what it is they must remember to be the kind of student worker that their teacher expects and gradually like P they learn the kinds of answers which are expected to their teacher's questions. Like P they pick up the teacher's generalised discourse about what people should and shouldn't do. Within weeks of them starting school I overhear them telling others about what can and cannot be done according to Mrs. A. In this classroom to the discourses of work and being on task is added the overlay of individual responsibilities. Children are not only expected to work and to be on task but they are reminded about the need for self management. They also learn very quickly that not meeting Julia's expectations brings a less gentle response.

Julia OK. Can I just have stillness and eye contact. C I asked for eye contact. There's not one rule for you and one for every one else. I'll just go through the expectations for Reading Journals. I'm waiting for stillness from some people. D are you listening carefully? I also expect a quiet level of working. I'm going to crack down very hard on people who step out of that expectation. We've only got half an hour to complete this task.

In Jill's year five-six-seven classroom, the formation of work habits was done in part through children writing daily goals in their journals. (Throughout the school the students' written journals were a major instrument through which the establishment of children roles in monitoring their own work habits occurred, providing one clear example of the ways in which the discourses and processes of a work culture, behaviour management and literacy intersect). Their teacher also echoed frequent reminders about what was required.

OK everyone, you've got 20 minutes. This is a reminder to get organised, quieten down and write.

Today's journal entry : Did I achieve my goal? Why/why not? Set today's goal.

The older students did not always accept this emphasis as J's response to being told to edit, proof-read and rewrite his work indicates. *This means I have to do the same work. I've done two pages. Come off it. I don't want to do all this. This will take me ages.* It took time and repeated negotiations for the senior students in the school to accept this new literate culture. In previous times they had enjoyed an emphasis on the oral tradition.

I do not present these episodes as if they should have been otherwise nor to say that teachers and children could have been differently or better occupied or engaged. This is hard work for both students and teachers but it is what they do. Behaviour management is a primary role. Behaviour management occurs continually until they become the kinds of ideal students that teachers require to make a space for academic talk and learning. Literacy teaching is embedded and sometimes is hidden in this training. Students learn particular kinds of roles and rules for school. Teachers fear chaos without these rules in place and work hard on their maintenance. There are often contradictions between the discourse of what teachers want for the literate student and what teachers need to do in order to make the classroom unit behave as a class should. Teachers report never doing enough. There is desperation in Julia's reprimand a little later in the lesson.

That's lovely. On task with most people. C I asked you to do what we asked. Fold your fingers and have eye contact. Do it. E would you please stick to your task? P would you like to work in the middle of the floor please. Have you got a tissue K for your nose? Ah H we've only got twenty minutes for this task. H we've only got twenty minutes before we go on to our big book.

What kinds of on task literate behaviours are being sanctioned here and in the process what might children be learning about work and literate behaviour from the ways they are defined at school. In the transcripts above what might children learn about work?

- work is what you do at school
- work is good
- work means being on task
- work means doing things as an individual
- work means focussing on one thing at a time
- work can be hard
- good workers do a lot
- good workers work quickly
- literate work involves writing
- literate work involves concentration
- literate work involves silence
- literate work involves looking at your paper

What kind of literate worker might be the product of such discourses? What would the ideal student worker look like? This school literate worker contrasts quite sharply with the flexible workforce who can team collaboratively to solve problems which we are told Australia requires.

What is of interest here is the ways in which these teachers understand what it is they need to do with these children and why? It is not coincidental that their emphasis appears to be on training children to work at school. Children were taught how they should be as writers, readers, speakers and listeners. At the same time they are taught what good workers look like. Part of the literate culture is about work habits. Teachers believed that this was a major part of lifting the standards of literacy performance in this school which there was explicit pressure to do. Teachers explained that children had not been required in the past to perform the kinds of literate behaviours they expected; they had not corrected their own writing or taken home books to read or done homework for example. So part of their work in lifting the literacy standards was to change children's work habits and at this the teachers worked assiduously.

These teachers were conscious of their own, the principal's and some parents' evaluations of the students' literacy achievements in previous years as "shocking". They are also audiences of broader based media discourses which claim that literacy levels are low throughout Australia. These reports make a difference to what teachers ask of themselves and of children. The culture of this school is changing. The language of the media has become the language which drives literacy pedagogy to some extent. An excerpt from the principal's end of third term letter to staff echoes the similar themes:

*I am particularly satisfied with the **work** that you and the children have produced. The expressive art **work** is a wonderful statement about the aspirations you have for your children...In my travels around the school I am continually surprised and pleased to see how the academic levels of*

children's work have been lifted. This is due to your hard work, planning and reflecting on your practice....I feel very confident that with continued work in this area our school will become widely recognised as one of the very best.

What version(s) of literacy are being offered? In this study there were contradictory discourse and practices within each teacher's repertoire or literacy curriculum. However what the teachers had in common was the need to construct students who worked, who behaved as if they were working, who were responsible, who were on task.

A major amount of their time energy and talk was devoted to these ends. However they also continually strived to do more than this. At least two of the teachers regularly talked in terms of empowerment. They experienced their work both as a privilege and at times they spoke of feeling abused. The contradictory nature of teachers' work and the functions of schooling needs more thorough examination. Teachers juggle simultaneously the competing discourses of behaviour management, critical literacy, empowerment and work.

The literacy/work connection does not only occur at the level of school discourses. A number of educators have discussed the problematic nature of simplistic equations between work and literacy (Luke, 1992; Hull, 1993). The press frequently make explicit connections between literacy and work claiming that Australia's literacy levels are poor and that our productivity is not competitive internationally. More literacy is often mooted as the solution as the following headlines and quotations indicate.

- Literacy problems a barrier to output (Weekend Australian 1-2 1992)

- Poor literacy costs \$6.5bn, bosses told (The Advertiser, 1992)
- Young readers, writers 'just make the grade' (The Advertiser, July 5 1992)
- Literacy test attacked as a publicity stunt anyone can pass (The Advertiser, July 5 1992)
- Primary students literacy slammed (The Advertiser, February 3 1993)

The emphasis on work is not surprising given the nature of such headlines and TV reports which tell parents what are the top schools in the state and where they should send their children to get the best achievements. Teachers are constantly reading their worlds and the ways in which schooling is constructed in those worlds. The kinds of literacies they construct may seem contradictory but then their multiple roles are fraught with such contradictions. Children in their turn have to learn how to read their teachers and read the world of school. They also learn that the school approaching the new millennium is often a contradictory place where teachers try to make order out of chaos and have a good time and make sure that children work, play and learn, are empowered are responsible, are on task.....

Beyond behaviour management and work: other literate cultures at school

If Mem Fox (1993) is right about the 'language magician' what kinds of magic are being worked here, or might be worked here? The discourses of "work" echo resoundingly across literacy events, across artefacts, across teachers. We may well have the production of children for certain kinds of literate work. Deterministic views of cultural reproduction might be played out.

However this group of teachers continually and passionately tried to create other literacies at the same time as they trained children in work habits. When they spoke about literacy they talked of empowerment, critical literacy, the valued genres, children as authors and their commitment to children's literature. And these were not just words. Their imaginings of alternative literate cultures were enacted with great energy and with an incredible amount of work and personal expense outside of school hours to construct classroom literate cultures which children could not refuse.

To conclude this paper I briefly indicate what else these teachers did with other kinds of literacies. To do justice to these would be the subject of another entire paper and it is where I intend to focus at the oral presentation this July. Now however I offer glimpses only to demonstrate the multiplicities of literacy pedagogies and discourses teachers juggle in disadvantaged schools. This will take the form of a written list to indicate the complexity and the potential.

Ella maintained a space for humour. She role-played herself as the school principal and analysed, amid squeals of laughter from the children, the added power she now had. She constantly spoke about the absurdity of school life and her own teaching and invited the children to laugh with her at her ongoing critical deconstruction of her role. She used literature to create opportunities for children to think about both the funny and sad aspects of school experience. She used music - traditional ballads, religious songs for children and popular music to create shared texts. The children sung their way through multiple shared books. She wrote about their garden and had children keep their own garden journals. She turned

look-cover-write-check into a game no non-speller or speller could resist. And all the time she asked, *Am I doing enough? Is this OK?*

Jan discovered reader's theatre, genre and reading partners and explored and experimented with each of these literacy events. As the children worked together in literacy events Jan's knowledge of group work allowed her to invent her own social versions of other literacy tasks. Jan made time for play through the readers theatre and she and the students began to look at texts in new ways as they looked for texts which would be good for readers' theatre activities. Children's roles as readers began to change. At the same time she asked, *Are they getting better? They are getting better aren't they?*

Julia discovered non-fiction big books and the Macintosh and worked her own kind of language magic as she constructed information texts with five, six and seven year olds that were better than those that were being published. She explored with them how certain kinds of knowledge were created through text production and how those texts worked.

Julia re-discovered the power of oral storytelling and used tales from her own life to add to the text-based literacies she valued so highly. She also joined forces with Jill and set up a language partners approach to cross-age tutoring inspired by Heath' (1991) *Children of Promise*. At the same time she asked, *What else could I be doing? What do other people do?*

Jill began to make time and space for critical literacy. She discussed with her class what kinds of books are short listed for book awards and why. She asked them to look for the absences from the book awards and to work out why Paul Jennings hadn't received an award. She asked them to re-read texts from different positions and to argue for these readings. She

gave them time to consider what kinds of texts they thought should or should not be read to younger children and why. She taught them how to research the ways in which teachers taught reading in other classrooms so that they would be better able to help their young partners in Julia's class. They studied how auto-biographies were written and wrote their own. They learnt to write letters including critical feedback about gender to published authors. They learnt how to do homework and how to write extended pieces of prose. At the same time she asked : *What are they learning? What else could they be learning?*

Teaching literacy is not a matter of choosing a pedagogy. It is full of contradictions. Teachers do hard labour to create a space to do what they consider to be real work and real teaching and real literacy so that children can learn to participate in literate cultures at school. A lot of their work involves setting up and maintaining rules and routines to make an intellectual space where they can enjoy literate conversations and help children produce the kinds of literate artefacts and performances they value. Some of the literate culture is about rule-driven routine work and some of it is a risky business where teachers explore new roles for themselves and students around the constructions of meanings and texts.

I'm not sure we can prepare anyone for the new millennium, nor what kinds of literacies or work or play might be required. If we want teachers to go on surviving and creating everchanging cultures of literacy we need to look more closely at the nature of their work and literate practices in schools and how these practices intersect with the other increasingly complex functions of schooling. We will be fortunate if we have a workforce of teachers who continue to juggle the impossible whilst the media continues to tell them of their shortcomings.

References

- Badger, L., Barnett, J., Comber, B., Peters, J. (1992) "Professional development in language and literacy in disadvantaged schools : a statewide survey," Education Department of South Australia.
- Comber B. (1988) "Celebrating and analysing successful teaching", *Language Arts* Vol. 64, No.2.
- Connell, R.W. (1985) **Teachers' Work**, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney
- Delpit, L. (1988) "The silenced dialogue : power and pedagogy in educating other people's children," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 58, No.3, pp.280-298.
- Delpit, L. (1992) "Acquisition of literate discourse : bowing before the master," *Theory into Practice*, Vol 31, No 4, pp. 296-302.
- Dunn, M. (1991) "Cross-cultural issues and whole language", *Australian Journal of Reading*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp.199-205.
- Edelsky, C. Draper, K. and Smith, K. (1983) 'Hookin' 'em in at the start of schooling a "whole Language" classroom', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 14, pp. 257-81.
- Fox, M. (1993) "What do we do with language and what does language do to us : a paper exploring literacy and language in the lives of teachers, writers, men, women and children, " Plenary paper presented at the 1st

International Australian Reading Association Conference, "Literacy for the New Millennium", July.

Freebody, P. (1990) "Cultural Positioning in the assessment of students' writing : on the impossibility of tenor-free assessment," Plenary Paper to the Language in Education Conference, University of Wollongong, December.

Freebody, P. and Welch, A. (1993) Individualization and domestication in current literacy debates in Australia, in Freebody, P. and Welch, A.(Eds.) **Knowledge, Culture and Power : International Perspectives on Literacy as Policy and Practice**, The Falmer Press, pp 209-230

Haberman, M. "The pedagogy of poverty versus good teaching", *Phi Delta Kappan*, December, pp. 290-294.

Harste, J., Woodward, V. and Burke, C. (1984) **Language Stories and Literacy Lessons**, Exeter, NH, Heinemann.

Heath, S.B. and Mangiola, L (1991) **Children of promise : literate activity in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms**, National Education Association Publication, Washington.

Hull, G. (1993)"Hearing other voices : a critical assessment of popular views on literacy and work," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 63, No. 1, pp. 20-49.

Jones, A. (1989) "The cultural production of classroom practice", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol.10, No.1, pp.19-31.

Luke, A. (1992) "Literacy and work in new times," *Open Letter*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp.3-15.

Smith, F.(1973) " Twelve easy ways to make learning to read difficult,"in Smith, F (Ed) **Psycholinguistics and reading**, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, pp. 183 -196.

Stuckey, J. E. (1991) **The Violence of Literacy**, Boynton/Cook Publishers, Heinemann, Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Walton, C.(1992) "Literacy in Aboriginal contexts : re-examining pedagogy," *Discourse*, The Australian Journal of Educational Studies, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp.39-45